

Walking in the Forest: Understanding Spaces Through Cartography in the New-Generation Malayalam Cinema

Kavya EM

Abstract

Keywords

Space, forest, place, new-generation Malayalam cinema, cartography, heterotopias

The space that we inhabit has a great influence on our sense of self in multiple ways. It is the postmodern knowledge system that has witnessed the advent of spatiality and the spatial turn in the theoretical analysis of the current era. A revolution in media and technological advancements altered how people perceived and experienced space. Until the 1970s, geographers examined space as a neutral container, a blank canvas filled with human activity. They believed that space doesn't have an active role in shaping human life but considered space as a backdrop against which human behaviour is played out. The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed the emerging importance of space over time in art, literature, and cinema. Pictorial representations and visual narratives paved the way for the subjective understanding of space and place in the twenty-first century.

Cinema as an audio-visual medium is vested in the significant and realistic portrayal of multiple spaces through the depiction of the city, countryside, houses, buildings, forest, etc. Malayalam cinema of the recent era - in other words, the new-generation cinema is rooted in the hyper-realistic aspects of human life along with a tint of magic realism in particular. Most of them deal with the question of human existence during the contemporary period with importance to the setting. The “place” (Tuan 3) or the “space” (3) in which the story takes place has a greater significance considering the action. These movies have explored and mapped the social and political landscapes of Kerala with a dramatic touch on the events and how they have been formulated through artistic expression.

Malayalam cinema has a long history of forest portrayals to offer, in multiple ways in different genres and different forms. Forest has been an integral part of the Malayali existence for a long period and the Malayalam cinema industry utilized it as a major aspect of their artistic expression. That mastery in interweaving artistic capabilities with creative expressions in portraying human life in all its precision and beauty is visible in the movies of directors like Ramu Kariat, Shaji N Karun, I V Sasi, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, John Abraham, C Aravindan, P V Chandran and P Padmarajan. From the movies shot inside studio spaces to real-life locations, all of them have dealt with forest spaces intricately and meticulously.

Malayalam movies of the late twentieth century including *Nellu* (1974), *Aaranyakam* (1988), *Mrugaya* (1989), and *Churam* (1997) to mention a few, portrayed the forest as an abode for human beings. While the former movies discussed the life and experiences of the Adivasi communities, the latter tried to showcase the impact of the forest environment on the character development of the

protagonists. Malayali life during the period was majorly dependent upon nature and its resources. Hence nature, especially forests, lakes, and other water bodies were important settings in these movies. Horror movies of this period in the industry like *Sreekrishna Parunth* (1984), *Kadamatathachan* (1984), and *Aakasha Ganga* (1999), etc showcased the forest as a habitat of supernatural elements.

The twenty-first century marks a turn in Malayalam cinema, with the predominant nature of the Malayalam cinema shifting its focus from character and emotionally-oriented movies to settings-oriented ones. A repositioning from the family-oriented narratives on rural lives to a realistic blend of rural and urban lives built through geographical significance. Along with the characters and their emotionally charged lives, the locality, architecture, environment, and other elements became prominent. Experimenting with emerging techniques and modes has always been a focus for the creators and technicians in the Malayalam film industry and it thus initiated the wave of “New-generation Malayalam Cinema” during the 2010s. Unlike movies of the pre-2000 era, new-generation cinema works on the principle that settings and characters complement each other in the diegetic space of cinema in creating human experiences. By emphasizing space and place, it is trying to portray an animated version of the setting that plays a crucial role in the individual development of the characters. For example, the city of Bangalore in *Bangalore Days* (2014), Kumarankari Syrian Church in *Amen* (2013), and an old house in the middle of an isolated island inside a lake in *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) all play the role of a character in the movies along with the actors.

This paper is an attempt to understand the new-generation Malayalam cinema’s engagement with space, especially forest spaces. It argues that new-generation Malayalam cinema tries to map forest spaces using the subjective understanding of the inhabitants with the help of narrative cartography. It tries to unravel how the “representational spaces” (Lefebvre 38) have been delineated in the “representations of space” (38) through the subjective understanding of the “spatial practices” (38) in the movies. Human traversal through space in time mapping the spaces by following subjective histories and oral narratives will be looked upon. It also seeks to consider walking as a major technique for mapping forest spaces. A detailed analysis of two movies, *Churuli* (2021) by Lijo Jose Pellissery and *Virus* (2018) by Aashiq Abu will be utilized in theorizing the “diegetic” (Steffen 25) space of the movies, taking the “natural space” (Lefebvre 30) of the forest into consideration. Key concepts in Spatial Literary Studies, importantly Henry Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* and the idea of “heterotopia” (Foucault 24) introduced by Michel Foucault in his essay “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” will be utilized in comprehending these movies.

Churuli the 2021 Malayalam movie was written by Hareesh S and directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery is the story of two undercover police officers, Antony (played by Chemban Vinod Jose) and Shajeevan (by Vinay Fort), and their journey to a village called Churuli in search of a wanted criminal Mayiladam Parambil Joy (Soubin Shahir). As the story progresses, they get stuck inside a cyclical loop of time inside the village along with the people. Churuli is a village in the middle of the forest with a violent criminal mob as the inhabitants. They have an area-specific behavioural pattern inside and outside the space of Churuli. They mask their identities and pretend to be good and calm outside Churuli while their degraded moral standards are visible once they cross the bridge inside the

forest. The spatially influenced behavioural patterns of the residents show the lawlessness in the land of Churuli. The movie ends with Shajivan and Antony along with the character Joy played by Soubin Shahir ending up in a supernatural spiral and moving towards the moon in the jeep. The residents of the Churuli have a mysterious life along with the space they live in. The forest seems to carry all the mysteries and is protecting them from the mainland.

The movie *Virus* is based on the 2018 Nipah outbreak in the Calicut district of the state of Kerala in India. It is a medical thriller written by Muhsin Parari and Suhas- Sharfu directed by Aashiq Abu. The movie progresses by detailing the government's attempts to trace the origin of the Nipah outbreak in Calicut with the help of medical professionals, police, and the locals. Zakariya Muhammed, a 28-year-old man dies of an unknown viral infection at the Government Medical College Kozhikode. The state government's efforts to reject the central government's notion that the virus is a bioweapon led to the identification of Zakariya as the index patient. The state government attempts to prove that he contracted the virus after coming in contact with a fruit bat. Virologist Suresh Rajan and Community medicine student Dr. Annu tracked down the route of the spread through CCTV footage, photographs, observations, and their interactions with the people who are related to the patients. The subjective nature of the inquiry by Dr. Annu and Dr. Suresh Rajan through mapping the spaces to unveil the truth about the epidemic is well portrayed in the movie. They followed the idea that "to draw a map is to tell a story, in many ways, and vice versa" (Tally 4) in creating the cartographic representations of the forest space through walking in the forest.

These are movies about the human consciousness of space and the impact of memory in navigating human existence. These movies posit two modalities of spatial representation: objective - the cartographic representation of space - and subjective- represented through the lived experience. Both *Churuli* and *Virus* posit the vitality of spaces, focusing on subjective cartography as an amalgamation of both modalities. The objective indicates the cartographic knowledge presented in the movies through the cinematography, the landscapes, water bodies, and the wilderness. Multiple wide-angle and aerial shots of the forest in *Churuli* are used to show the geographical land of Churuli. Aashiq Abu in *Virus* uses aerial shots of isolated roads and multiple locations in Kozhikode city including Medical College Hospital, Baby Memorial Hospital, bus stands, marketplaces, and beaches in tracking down the epidemic. While subjective knowledge showcases the spatial knowledge formulated through the collective memory and the lived experiences of the people in the diegetic space of the movie. These movies try to show cartographic images of space produced through the subjective understanding of the spaces. To be precise, mapping of spaces through purposeful human traversal in spaces, be it the space of the hospital or the forest in *Virus*, and the space of the Churuli forest in *Churuli*. "A key element of such geo-critical explorations has been the affective geography made visible through a given subject's own experience with and in places" (Tally 35).

Shajivan and Antony along with the people of Churuli travelled through the dense forest in a jeep to reach the village, but the route the villagers travelled to reach Joy's home isn't mentioned anywhere on the map. Unnikrishnan's and Avarachan's hunting journey inside the Janakkadu forest in *Virus*, and the forest in *Churuli* respectively were guided by their acquired knowledge through walking in the forest. They learned about the spaces through their subjective knowledge of the area.

Doctor Annu's investigation based on human communication and the CCTV footage maps the trajectory of the disease along with formulating two different maps for the forest and the hospital. Her interaction with the relatives of the diseased opens up an opportunity to map the space through their lived experiences. The amalgamation of the existing knowledge with the imaginary awareness of the space resulted in the literary cartography over the real one.

Churuli begins with a story of a monk who walks through the forest in search of Perumadan, an evil spirit. On his way, he came across a rolled pangolin. He takes it and puts it in his basket to give it to his kids as a toy. After a while, the pangolin starts talking and advises the monk to take different paths than he wishes. The monk follows his words and ends up walking all around the forest without knowing that he has been misled by Perumadan so far. The movie begins and ends with the same story narrated in the background, initially by a woman and in the climax by Mayiladum Kutti Joy. It in a way signifying the land of Churuli has a lot of mysteries and stories that they hide. The forest has a cyclical nature and an unending loop in which it traps the people. Shajivan warns Antony about it by saying, "All the forests are the same. They lie coiled up like a snake. So, don't step on it" (Pellissery 01:12:36- 40). There are stories about the land, and oral histories that give the forest a mysterious form.

The world of *Churuli* is an amalgamation of mythical and folklore elements that contribute to transforming the real world into a mythical one. The director has attempted to transform the geographically existing space into a fantastic world in *Churuli*. The story of Perumadan initially appears as a myth and leaves the audience ambiguous at the end of the movie making it difficult to decipher who is the actual Perumadan. Two supernatural creatures with shiny protruding eyes like extensions on their face come into sight while walking in the forest whenever Shajivan is in doubt. Along with that the mysterious house of the sister,¹ Mayiladum Kutti Joy's narrative on how he escaped from the police every time they came to arrest him from Churuli and the slow blinking of eyes by the people of Churuli converts the forest into a fantastic world. It is a story about narrating a story with both the imagined and the real worlds interacting with each other and intersecting. Magic Realism, a narrative strategy characterized by encompassing the mythical or the fantastic elements in realistic fiction has been used as the core technique to introduce a fantastic element to the Churuli forest region and its livelihood. Some animals can talk and human beings can imagine themselves as something else with supernatural capabilities. Life in Churuli is the "entanglement of the cyclical repetitive, days and nights, months and years, with the linear repetitive, such as a series of gestures, of blows of the hammer" (Lefebvre 208).

On the other hand, *Virus* uses maps literally to narrate the story. This movie talks about how the forest has been mapped out in the tracking of Nipah virus infection. In the sense that they have tried mapping both the districts - Kozhikode and Malappuram- as well as the spaces of the hospital and the forest to unravel the nature and spread of the epidemic. Virologist Suresh Rajan's attempts to trace the epidemiological link between index patient Zakaria and Unnikrishnan force him to create a travel history of both, in the form of a map (Abu 02:00: 37). He states that "the striking similarity

¹ A woman with supernatural abilities and the people of Churuli addresses to her as sister.

between them is that, they both are linked to the forest and the animals” (Abu 02: 01: 09). The diegetic space of the movie maps the spaces through multiple spatial practices within the representational space of the film. That is both the forest spaces and the human or living spaces. The movie delineates the forest as a space of various human activities. For some people like Zakariya forest is a place of healing. In the medical sense forest is a space of disease. For the central government, the forest stands as a symbol of lawlessness and a nourishing ground for conspiracy theories. For the Kerala government, it is a site of clandestine activity (counterfeit currency exchanges).

In his 1991 book *The Production of Space*, Henry Lefebvre argued that space is produced in the interaction of three elements, that is the spatial triad: “spatial practices, representations of space, and the representational spaces” (Lefebvre 38). Spatial practices are the activities through which we concretize our knowledge of space. The activities that people undertake in their concrete or abstract relation to space, such as creating roads, and waterways for transportation, zoning cities into residential, commercial, and office spaces, drawing maps and layouts, and engaging in different activities at home, in the office or the mall. This particular study prioritizes walking amongst all other spatial practices. It tries to substantiate that the characters in both *Churuli* and *Virus* are walking through multiple spaces to map the area. Characters are walking through the forest in groups or individually like Shajivan’s lonely walks in search of Joy, Philip and Shajivan’s walks to restock tapioca in the forest in *Churuli* and Roshan’s and Zakaria’s walks for counterfeit activities and healing respectively in *Virus*. Dr. Annu’s visit to the houses of the diseased and the movement of people inside the hospital maps the spaces in *Virus* with a blend of narrative and visual cartography. While the representations of space signify the abstract knowledge of the space represented in maps, city plans, landscapes, waterscapes, etc. It is the “knowledge that emerged from a practice and elaborated upon it by a formalization and the application of a logical order” (Lefebvre 79). It is a homogenous and demarcated space. Here it is the space of the cinema. Representational spaces, in contrast, denote the knowledge of the space in lived relation to it, such as perceived differences between home and outside, temples or churches, one’s own country and another, etc. It is a concrete and heterogeneous space of the forests portrayed in both movies. “In produced space, acts reproduce ‘meanings’ even if no ‘one’ gives an account of them” (Lefebvre 144). The spaces of representation and the representational spaces combinedly contribute to our understanding of space.

In Lefebvre's view, geography assumes that space is an objectively given entity, a kind of unchanging container in which people and objects exist:

Vis-à-vis lived experience, space is neither a mere ‘frame,’ after the fashion of the frame of a painting, nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive what is poured into it. Space is a social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure. (93-94)

Spaces are produced by the technological and cultural interventions of human beings through industrial labour or creative labour. Each space has a past implicated in the histories of social struggle, relations of class, caste, and gender, and the question of who works the land and who owns its produce. So, it is thus a part of the history of modes and relations of production, as space is both a

social product and a means of production itself. The space of forest represented in the new-generation cinema always discusses the struggles, hierarchies, and unconventional nature of human existence. The space of Churuli, Vayalada,² Kakkayam,³ and Janakikkadu⁴ forests are considered wild, scary, and lawless yet hegemonic. Here the forest never offers the safety and the freedom of a “place,” but is not as unfamiliar and mysterious as a “natural space.” The Churuli forest is transforming from just being a space to a place with the kind of freedom and safety it offers to the people, but mysterious nature persists. While forest spaces represented in *Virus* stand for lawlessness.

The narration in *Churuli* and *Virus* moves through the geographic specifications of the “place” (Tuan 3) where the characters migrated to, evidently the forest. The time frame or the period through which the space has undergone considerable transformation is depicted thoroughly by the directors. Churuli forest and the forest to which Zakaria goes for photography- Kakkayam- are portrayed as a space that was built through and for hard labour. The space of *Churuli* is constructed by the people who have migrated in search of a better livelihood and remain hostile to Antony and Shajivan. In Lefebvre's view space is constructed historically in time with the efforts of people. The social construction of space through human relationships, specifically the hierarchical relationship between people belonging to different castes, classes, etc. The village of Churuli was constructed by the people who have eloped from the cities to the forest. The scene in which the jeep driver tells Shajivan in the middle of a fight “Why would people come to this dense forest if they haven’t committed any crime or if they don’t have to hide” is a sound example. Nature itself plays a vital role in the historical production of space yet for Lefebvre human intervention is highly significant. Transforming the forest into a village space with all necessary amenities denotes the constructed space. The constructed space of the forest lacks the strict rules of religion and law. Philip transforming his toddy shop into a church for two days for his daughter's first communion suggests the fluid nature of spaces. Joy tells Antony mentioning the police officers, “During their stay at Churuli They put on fat eating wild meat and drinking arrack, what is lacking here sir? ...if you want to kill someone you can do that too. No questions asked. Isn’t this a paradise, Sir?” (Pellissery 01:46:33- 01:47:35). It strongly posits the idea that forests do not adhere to the strict rules of the land.

“Space and place are indeed historical, and the changing spaces and perceptions of space over time are crucial to an understanding of the importance of spatiality in literary and cultural studies today” (Tally 5). *Virus* never fails to explore and portray the demarcation between the city and the forest through the long aerial shots of the medical college, the city in multiple angles, aerial shots of Perambra, Baby Memorial Hospital, and the Vayalada forest. The lawlessness of the forest space is produced through the lawless human activities inside the forest. For the people including Roshan, Zakari, and Unnikrishnan the forest is a “space” (Tuan 3) of freedom, and they transformed it into a “place” (3) by making it a land of safety. The movie discusses how the ‘Vayalada’ Forest and

² A hilltop destination in Kozhikode district of Kerala in India surrounded by forest.

³ A Dam site located in Kozhikode in the outskirts of Malabar Wild Life Sanctuary.

⁴ An ecotourism project under the Kozhikode Forest Division.

‘Janakikkadu’ achieved the status of a tourist spot through human interventions. It also talks about how insensitive human activities interfere with the existence of the fauna and flora of the forest and also result in the spread of serious viral infections.

According to Foucault, “The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space” (22). His work “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” discusses “emplacements” (24), the sites or spaces produced through human understandings. The two examples of “emplacements” are “utopias” (24) and “heterotopias” (24). A “utopia” (24) is an imaginative reflection of the real world that does not exist, while heterotopias are spaces with practices different from everyday human activities. “Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about” (3). Foucault argues that all cultures produce two types of “heterotopias”; “crisis heterotopias” (24) and the “heterotopia of deviation” (25). “Heterotopias” changes according to time. They can juxtapose multiple spaces by challenging the normal flow of time.

The new-generation Malayalam cinema juxtaposes the single real space of the forests into multiple spaces through the subjective nature of human practices. The “natural space” of the forest is real and a part of the society, yet not. Walking in the forest derives a subjective understanding of the space in the individuals. The village Churuli in the middle of the forest is a part of the society but is treated as something alien because of the nature of the people. They have created an “other space” (Foucault 22), through their labour which is real, perfect, and meticulous for them but not accessible to outsiders. Churuli is a heterotopia of deviation inhabiting people with behavioural patterns deviant from the dominant social norms. The land itself is shown as something mysterious. The transformed space of the hospital, the isolation ward, and the Nipah wards in *Virus* are all heterotopias. The “diegetic” (Steffan 25) space of the movie portrays the hospital during an epidemic as the other space, something that people perceive with fear and disgust. The subjective histories generated by recognizing the forest as a field of clandestine activities, lawlessness, and healing along with other activities mark the forest as a “heterotopia of juxtaposition.”

Along with the movies discussed in detail, other new-generation movies such as *Pada*, *Carbon*, *Rorschach*, *Aarkkariyam*, and *Unda* to name a few, deal with the new subjectivity of spatial understanding by walking in the forest. *Pada* demonstrates the human-nature relationship and the significance of ecology through a protest against the controversial Adivasi Land Amendment Bill held at the Palakkad collectorate in 1999. *Pada* demarcates the spaces of the office and the forest through the memory of the characters. Here the natural space of the forest is considered an objective resource to be exploited by the industrialists and the government. The 2018 movie *Carbon* is an adventure thriller based on the story of a greedy young man and his quest for the long-lost treasure in the Talakkani forest on the Kerala Tamil Nadu border. Sibi, an opportunist young man reaches a forest guest house to run a business in the tourism field to achieve quick success. His greedy quest to find the lost treasure inside the Talakkani forest during the reign of the Tippu Sultan maps the space of the forest through Sibi’s subjective understanding. He follows the subjective histories narrated by Balanpilla to transform the natural space of the forest into a living space through Kannan’s and Balan’s labour. *Rorschach* is a 2022 Malayalam psychological thriller. Luke Antony the NRI

businessman takes a road trip from UAE to Kerala to seek revenge on Dileep who killed his wife Sophia Luke during a robbery. The movie utilized nature particularly the forest as a prominent setting. Forest is portrayed as the setting that reflects the psychological nature of the people; cold, wild, and mysterious.

In conclusion, such new-generation Malayalam movies as *Virus* and *Churuli* are well-constructed stories combining the subjective history and the geography of different forest regions. The diegetic space of the movies through audiovisual components like background music and cinematography along with the narrative substantiated the spatiality and spatial turn in the postmodern era. Both movies are an amalgamation of events narrated through retrospective and prospective means in constructing the subjective consciousness of space in time. The social production of space and the role of spatial practices in transforming spaces into a place of security are well portrayed in the movies. The new-generation Malayalam cinema has succeeded in unveiling how the “representational spaces” (Lefebvre 38), that is the forest have been delineated in the “representations of space” (38), (the movie and the literary maps) through the subjective understanding of the “spatial practices” (38), i.e. the act of walking in the forest in the movies. An extension of this study can be carried away by utilizing the concept of ‘third space’ by Edward Soja and “the Chronotope” (Bakhtin 85) introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin in understanding the “diegetic” (Steffen 25) space of the movies.

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